

172
THE MERCY OF GOD;
Especially considered with reference to our
present situation.

A 2
S E R M O N,

PREACHED

AT ST. JULIAN'S, SHREWSBURY,

On Sunday, Sept. 14, 1800.

BY SAMUEL BUTLER, M. A.

Head Master of Shrewsbury School, and late Fellow of
St. John's College, Cambridge.

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BY THEIR OBLIGED

AND FAITHFUL SERVANT,

S. BUTLER.

Sept. 20, 1800.

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THE author of the following Sermon begs leave to state the circumstances under which he has been induced to offer it to the public. Being engaged both in an occupation which requires constant assiduity, and in a literary work of great importance, he had no thought of appearing in any public character, conceiving it his duty not to undertake any literary engagements which may divert his time and attention from their present objects. He therefore committed the following pages to paper the evening before he officiated for an highly respected friend; and from the same motives which induced him to write them, added to the request of those for whose judgement he cannot but feel the greatest deference, has been urged to publish them in a cheap form, for general circulation. He is fully sensible of the inefficiency of that excuse which is sometimes offered for hasty productions, and therefore begs he may not be considered as making use of the plea of

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haste and want of time for corrections, to cover the defects of the present composition. The only defence he has to offer is this — The following sermon was written on the spur of the moment, by one who has few opportunities of exerting himself in the pastoral duties; is published at the request of some respectable members of the congregation to whom it was preached, and of other friends, and from the author's earnest desire of employing his humble talents to promote the public instruction and general good.

N. B. An edition on superior paper may be had, price 1s.

A SERMON, &c.

PSALM LXVIII. 19.

Praised be the Lord daily: even the God who helpeth
us, and poureth his benefits upon us. —

IT is by no means easy to account for the singular inconsistencies which mankind are apt to fall into, in their estimation of the duties of Morality and Religion. Ingratitude, in a moral view, appears to us so detestable a vice, that it is reprobated by the universal consent of mankind; yet, in a religious light, tho' gratitude to the Supreme Being is allowed to be a debt we can never sufficiently discharge, the sinful omission of it is not held a mark of such depravity, as to exclude men from the estimation of their fellow-creatures. Without investigating the remoter and subservient causes of this contradiction, I shall at once proceed to point

out those which are the principal; and by calling your attention to the infinite and perpetual mercies of God, I shall endeavour, by a few instances, to bring home to your feelings some points, which perhaps have not met with all that consideration from us which they deserve.

I am far from thinking so ill of human nature, as to believe that the ingratitude which we shew to the supreme Giver of all good, arises from an obstinate depravity of mind; though I confess it is a certain proof of a heart not right with God. The Author of our being has surely bestowed on us all, in some degree, the finer feelings of the soul; and though in some they may be acute, in others dull, they can never be entirely blunted, but in those who are totally lost to the very name of humanity, hardened in every vice, and polluted by every crime. The prevailing cause, I apprehend, will be found to consist in an inexcusable and guilty carelessness, which inconsiderately attributes those blessings which it constantly and habitually receives, to the proximate, instead of the primary cause; and rather holds them to be
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matters of right and course, than of grace and favour.

Let us cast our eyes around us. Behold the glorious lamp of day, risen in the firmament, dispensing light and heat, nourishing, cheering, and supporting all things. Did it ever occur to any one of us, when beholding his majestic orb hastening to impart his influence to the western hemisphere, did it, I say, ever occur to us to ask, To whom do we owe this blessing, and by whose unerring laws have we the assurance that to-morrow will witness the same effulgence of glory, and receive the same benefits of light and heat, which we have experienced to-day? If we are asked, how we know that the sun will rise to-morrow, we say that he will *naturally* rise. And here lies the source of our ingratitude: we are content with assigning merely the proximate cause. We stop short. We do not "look through Nature up to Nature's God." We consider Nature as an agent, whereas Nature signifies only a fixed and regular recurrence of effects, of which the Author and the Cause, is God. Every natural benefit, therefore, which we receive, is undoubtedly a mercy from God; the

neglect of which consideration is another powerful cause of human ingratitude. All are ready to acknowledge, that signal benefits conferred on them, which they were totally insufficient to procure themselves, are to be considered as instances of divine favour and protection. But we are too apt to forget our own unworthiness; which is a third prevailing cause of our ingratitude. Whatever is bestowed on us, of which we stand in need, which is essential to our comfort and happiness, is a mercy: and the more so, if we have not the slightest claim to it.

Let us consider then our condition. We are the creatures of God. "*Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus?*" As God is our Creator, and as his power is supreme and uncontrollable, he might have created us incapable of happiness. To have even exempted us from absolute misery, was more than we could of right demand. Or, as we are continually offending him, and provoking his displeasure, he might "Make our senses, fores, and pains to us, instead of what they now are, instruments of gratification and enjoyment. He might," as an elegant writer observes, "have
" made

“made every thing we tasted bitter, every thing we saw loathsome, every thing we touched a sting, every smell a stench, and every sound a discord.” * And that we deserve this, we must both acknowledge, and are indeed selfcondemned by our own severity to our fellow-creatures that offend us. That things are not thus, that our senses are the instruments of our pleasures, and that we are placed among objects so suited to our perceptions, as continually to minister to our refreshment and delight, is surely owing to no merit and no power of our own. It arises, as we must acknowledge, from the bounty of our Creator; and as our own conscience must convict us all of innumerable offences against him, that we continue in this state is owing to his mercy.

Thus not only every common and ordinary enjoyment which we feel, but every misery which we escape, is a new mercy; and it is impossible to look on ourselves, or around us, without meeting with examples of the divine mercy in continued and never-ceasing exertions for our comfort and support: and the contemplation of universal nature

* See Dr. PALEY on the Divine Benevolence.

nature affords an unbounded view of infinite goodness on the part of God, and infinite unworthiness on our own. In this awful and unlimited prospect, the feeble ken of human understanding is lost and bewildered, and it becomes necessary for us to select some particular object on which it may repose: and it is a most sublime and affecting circumstance to know,* that if every man were called to select some particular instance of God's mercy by which he is more immediately struck, perhaps hardly two persons would agree in chusing the same; so vast, so varied, so infinite, is the benevolence of God. I would here be understood as speaking with reference to the general and constant mercies of the Creator; for with regard to partial or extraordinary instances, they who have alike experienced them, cannot but agree in like sentiments of acknowledgment.

It is to this latter kind of mercies that I principally wish to draw your attention in this discourse; and by a few observations on the present instance of divine mercy, in so bountifully providing the fruits of the earth for our support, I shall endeavour to shew the
dreadful

* See Dr. PALEY as above.

dreadful and enormous guilt of those, who, from the most selfish and sordid motives, continue to withhold from their fellow-creatures that supply, which it has pleased the Almighty to provide for their relief.

When we dwell on that most delightful of all the divine attributes, the Mercy of God, we must at the same time bear in mind another, which appears in severer glory, I mean his Justice. The relative situation in which by the divine favour we are permitted to stand, is that of children to our Almighty Father. To us he exercises, with unerring wisdom, that wholesome discipline, which we, to the best of our feeble judgment, exercise towards our children: warning, reproof, admonishing, correcting, ever indulgent to our errors, lenient to our failings, merciful to our sins. The necessity of correction we cannot but admit, unless we are willing presumptuously to establish what the jargon of modern Atheism is pleased to stile the perfectibility of human nature; which is indeed capable of becoming perfect in every crime. If then, for our admonition or chastisement, it pleaseth the Almighty to visit us with some heavy calamity, it is our part with
patience

patience and resignation to submit. National sins may be corrected by national punishment; and whoever considers the severe and afflicting dearth, which we have so lately suffered, as proceeding merely from accidental causes, seems to me, I confess, to attribute too much to the merits of human nature, and too little to the wisdom of God. When men attempt to investigate or account for the divine dispensations, they are treading on holy ground: it behoves them to proceed with reverential awe; yet surely we may proceed, if we are careful to bear in mind our frailty, and extreme infirmity of judgement. To me, I confess it appears, that since this country has been engaged in the contest with Anarchy and Atheism, the hand of Providence has been manifested more singularly in its preservation, than in any period of equal duration since the foundation of the British empire. Our distinguished naval victories have been gained at periods, when the very existence of the country depended on our success. The machinations of our intestine foes have been brought to light at the most critical of periods, when a few more days would have given them strength and energy, which the most vigorous efforts could with difficulty have

have resisted. The enemy has been repulsed from our shores, and the life of our beloved Sovereign has more than once been preserved from the hand of the assassin: and our weakness has been turned into strength, by a union with our sister kingdom, at the very time when our enemies had hoped by long-fomented discord to separate us for ever.

Other circumstances I omit, which yet are of no mean importance. Let us ask, what would have been the consequence if our brave seamen had continued under Jacobinical delusion? if, instead of triumphs, we had suffered defeats from the tyrant of India? if the fleets of Holland had been added to those of our united foes? The instances of signal deliverances which we have experienced within these last eight years, are so many and so great, as cannot be paralleled in the like space of time, nay, scarcely even in centuries, in any period of the British history from the remotest age. If this be true, and I appeal merely to common information and common sense, there must be something extraordinary, something unusually strange in our preservation; we can owe it

therefore,

therefore, and let us owe it with due gratitude, to the interposition of God alone.

Yet it must be acknowledged, that while during the last eight years we have enjoyed an enviable prosperity, we have not been careful to repress the inroads of sin. While the commerce of the whole world has centered in these kingdoms, it has introduced with it avarice and profusion, luxury and want. Is it venturing too far to presume, that the late afflicting scarcity was a just and kind admonition, which, if properly received by us, may tend to check the enormities and subdue the untractableness of inordinate wealth. It is certain, that luxury never arrived at so uncontrollable an height in these kingdoms, as it has within a few years. Both that, and every other species of guilty dissipation, have of late in their various degrees infected every class of society; while avarice has prompted the merchant to unreasonable speculations, and immense abundance has been productive of ruinous profusion. The unprecedented mercies of God, which I have already mentioned, have not filled our hearts with that gratitude which we owe him, have not touched our minds with a due sense of his unbounded goodness,

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goodness; and our own infinite dependance. We have within the short space of five years twice received a warning, too awful to forget! and O may we not forget it! The want of the common necessities of life, is an evil which strikes too much home to our bosoms not to produce a keen and sensible feeling at the moment; but this, like all others, from the levity of the age, is temporary. Before the last year, the feelings of the former recent pressure were forgotten, and we seemed secure in our abundance. "*In our prosperity we said We shall never be removed. Thou, O God, of thy goodness hast made our hill so strong.*" May the late repetition of our sufferings have a sensible effect on our minds; may it teach us to check the prodigality of our inclinations, may it induce us to retrench our superfluities; and to make such defalcations from our luxuries, as may be effectually applied to the noblest of purposes, the relief of our fellow-creatures. It is indeed, and with honest pleasure be it spoken, it is a fact, that the generosity of all ranks of people was never more readily or more effectually exerted than in the late period of scarcity and distress. And when we know and feel this to be the case,

case, we may rest assured, that the admonition which was intended for us has not wholly lost its effect.

It is another memorable circumstance, that in both cases the mercies of God have been singularly exerted for our relief. The former scarcity was succeeded by plenty, and we have reason to believe that the present harvest, if not unusually abundant, is certainly not remarkable for being deficient below the usual produce of the year. But let us for a moment suppose it otherwise; the seasonable weather which has been afforded for collecting it, has been a most providential mercy; for what would have been the consequence of a scanty crop, mildewed by wet, and unripened by genial heat? The fact, however, seems most uncontrovertible, that the present harvest has both been collected with unequalled success, with scarcely any of the common partial interruptions, and that its abundance is at least equal to the supply of any common year. *"Praised, therefore, be the Lord daily, even the God who helpeth us, and poureth his benefits upon us."* His kind indulgence has ministered to our wants, and his bounteous

bounteous Providence hath turned our dearth into plenty, and our heaviness into joy.

What then can we think must be their portion, who can unite in withholding from mankind those abundant stores, which God has provided for their use? Who, not satisfied with extorting from the comforts of the moderately affluent and from the necessities of the poor, during a continued series of long, severe, and unequalled calamity, persevere in cruelty, and proudly bid defiance to the Almighty's will, intercepting that bounty which he intended for the general use? "*What mean ye, that ye beat my people to pieces, and grind the faces of the poor? saith the Lord of hosts.*"* An expostulation so severe, we may be assured will be followed by a proportionably dreadful punishment; and though it is hopeless to expect that human persuasions can prevail, when divine denunciations of vengeance have no effect, yet it is our duty to state what those denunciations are, and to enforce them to the best of our power. Either, then, the scriptures are wholly false, or wholly true. They cannot be *partly* false, because they are *entirely* consistent. They cannot be *partly* true

* Isaiah iii. 15.

true, because they declare themselves to be the *truth itself*. If, then, denunciations of the heaviest eternal punishments are contained in scripture, against those who have not charity, and especially that species of charity which consists in relieving the wants of our fellow-creatures: they who lay up treasures for themselves, and are not rich to God, who controvert the designs, abuse the mercies, intercept the bounty of their Creator, cannot hope to escape without most certainly feeling the tremendous effects of divine displeasure. Conscience may slumber, but it cannot sleep. It signifies not to trifle with idle hopes; the day of account must come; and not the less surely because uncertain. *The ground of a certain rich man brought forth plentifully, and he thought within himself, saying, What shall I do, because I have no room where to bestow my fruits? And he said, This will I do, I will pull down my barns, and build greater, and I will say unto my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years, take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry. But God said unto him, Thou fool, this night shall thy soul be required of thee.** Pause, and consider—WHAT SHALL THAT MAN SAY WHEN

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* Luke xii. 16.

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HE APPEARS, AND APPEAR HE MUST, BEFORE THE PRESENCE OF HIS GOD ?

A few words more, respecting our own line of conduct, shall conclude my discourse. It is of the highest importance that we should be persuaded of these truths, that the only way to secure to ourselves the mercies of God, is to endeavour to deserve them ; and that the misconduct or guilt of others, is no excuse for our own. Resignation to the dispensations of Providence, is the surest method of alleviating our calamities ; while, on the other hand, impatient repining is a sure cause of misery to ourselves, and is often productive of the most mischievous effects. It is to this restlessness of temper, uninfluenced by motives of religious patience, that we must attribute the ruinous guilt of those, who by attempting as they thought, to redress their injuries, have both aggravated the public sufferings, and harassed the public peace, by acts of unpardonable outrage and guilty violence. If a scarcity is real, the wilful destruction of the necessaries of life can only increase it ; if it be artificial, still it can only furnish a sure and never-failing argument to the authors of it,

for

for its continuance. Besides, in all cases, the loss never falls on the person whose property is destroyed. The insurance offices, or the public at large; are the ultimate sufferers. And this wanton violence can only occasion the loss of peace to the inoffensive neighbourhood; and, if detected, the loss of life to the offending parties. Besides, the spirit of revenge with which such acts are perpetrated, is so contrary to the spirit of Christianity, that we may be assured its indulgence will be attended with the most fatal consequences to our eternal happiness; and we may observe also, that the just and reasonable laws of any country, can never be wilfully violated, without at the same time offending against the laws of God. Acts of riotous and tumultuous violence, will give strength to unlawful combinations, permanency to extortion, and can only serve to aggravate either real or artificial scarcity with tenfold horrors.

Still, however, I think that there are just and lawful means of redress; and to all such we may safely, and it becomes us, to resort. Laws may be enforced against monopolists, and associations may be formed to abstain as
much

much as possible from certain articles of common supply. But then such associations must be religiously and inviolably adhered to in all their resolutions, or they will wholly lose their good effect. These considerations, however, do not belong to this place; and I only wish to warn you, in my present situation, of that important truth, which can never be sufficiently insisted on at the present juncture, that the abuse of God's mercies by others, affords not to us the shadow of excuse for pursuing a similar conduct. If we wish not to share in the eternal punishment of the guilty, let us not be partakers of their guilt; above all, let us not enhance it, by adding outrage to wrong, and the defiance of human laws to the violation of divine.

To conclude, let us consider the mercies of God in their true light, forgetting not, that we receive our breath, our life, our sustenance, our comforts, and every blessing we enjoy, from his paternal care. Let us endeavour to follow the example of his goodness, relieving the wants, softening the sorrows, compassionating the ignorance, allowing for the frailties, pardoning the errors,
of

of our fellow-creatures, *forbearing one another, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven us.* Remembering, that to the mercies of God we owe all our happiness in this world, and to that miracle of mercies, our Redemption, all our hopes of happiness in the world to come.

THE END.



J. and W. Eddowes, Printers.

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